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Dixon's Campbell Soup Supply Company continues to serve as backbone for the soup giant

By **THE REPORTER** |

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Campbell's Soup is a company that needs no introduction. To describe the importance of its place in the American kitchen as well as the American economy would be exorbitant.

In fact, Campbell's boasts that 95.8 percent of all American households have at least one Campbell product. But while Campbell's iconic red and white can is an unmistakable entity, few know where the vast majority of its can's most vital ingredient is processed.

Just off of Interstate 80, past a long and narrow two-way dirt road, rests a behemoth of a factory that serves as the backbone of the Campbell's Soup Company.

It is at this factory where the Camden, N.J.-based soup giant processes roughly 500 thousand tons of tomatoes per season that will be used in Campbell's soup products before they are sent to Campbell's factories across the continent to be packaged, shipped and finally placed on a grocery store shelf.

"Tomatoes are very important to us as a company because not only do they appear in different kinds of soups that we make but also in (other Campbell's brands) SpaghettiOs, V8 juice, Prego, Pace, ingredients for all of those," explained Agriculture Sustainability Programs Manager Dr. Daniel Sonke.

Sonke estimates that 95 percent of all Campbell's ingredients that are subsequently packaged at Campbell's factories throughout North America come from its two California processing plants: The slightly bigger one in Dixon and one to the south in Stockton.

"The two plants operate as a unified system. They share farmers and process similar ingredients. As a system, they process about three-quarters of a million tons of tomatoes every summer," added Sonke.

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It was tomatoes, the base in the company's most famous tomato soup, that brought Campbell's to the Golden State, with California producing 30-35 percent of all processed tomatoes in the world, according to Sonke.

It was in 1975 when Campbell's decided to expand its footprint in California with the construction of its Dixon and Stockton processing plants, which were acquired by the company in 1976.

Some 40 years later, business is still booming.

"We invest a lot in our two processing plants," said Sonke. "Every year we make capital improvements to improve the efficiency of the plant and ingredients we make."

But it is a bond with the very farmers and factory workers who have allowed Campbell's to thrive for so many years.

"Some of the families who farmed for us in the 1940s are still farming for us today," revealed Sonke. "Eighty percent have been growing for us for at least 25 years, and we have 50 family farms who provide the raw tomatoes to us under contract each year," Sonke said. "Many of them are in their 2nd or 3rd generations of farming for Campbell's."

General Manager of Agriculture & Strategic Manufacturing David Kiehn said that there are five employees of the plant who worked when the factory first opened.

"We have a long-standing history of these employees working here," Kiehn said. "It's like a big summer family."

For the roughly 200 plant workers, it is a family that is bonded together once a year for 100 days straight, 24-hours a day and seven days a week.

The operation unravels like clockwork. Every day, a seemingly endless parade of trucks, estimated to be in the hundreds, each filled to the brim with fresh — harvested roughly four hours prior — locally farmed tomatoes, travel to the factory where they unload the fruit.

Outside of the plant, the fruit is cleaned with water and sent up a "catwalk" where they are then transferred to the ardent and deafening factory where the workers do their part in helping to turn the tomatoes into different variations of pastes, concentrate and diced forms. No part of the tomato is wasted, with every bit being utilized, Sonke assured. Lastly, the now hot ingredients are filled into 300-gallon commercially sealed sterile bags that are put in boxes, and sent via railway to other factories throughout North America, where they will be packaged and stacked on grocery store shelves throughout North America.

Typically, on the first of October, the machines come to a halt, as it marks the end of the season. Outside of the 100 days of production, the factory functions with just 15 employees, such as Kiehn, who is responsible for procuring tomatoes and making sure the Dixon plant gets its daily tonnage requirements at both facilities.

"I make sure we hit the quality and the quantities that we want to produce on a daily basis," said Kiehn.

Kiehn was simply born to work for Campbell's. A native of Woodland, it was there where Kiehn's grandfather was a plant manager at a tomato processing plant. Kiehn's father ran a company that hauled tomatoes for Campbell's. At the age of 15, Kiehn was ushered into the tomato business, and



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“I’ve been around tomatoes my entire life,” Kiehn laughed.

Kiehn added that he had known many of the current employees for the entirety of his life.

“The average seniority of our seasonal employee is over 20 years,” said Kiehn. “They come back year after year because it’s a good job that pays well.”

Sonke, who specializes in working with local farmers on sustainability practices also takes pride in Campbell’s reputation.

“Our farmers have wanted to farm for us for many years,” he said. “The fact that the employees choose to come back season after season I think speaks volumes for how favorable of an employer Campbell’s is.”

“It brings you a lot of pride in what you do because you know these people enjoy coming here every year,” said Kiehn.

Though a billion dollar company, Campbell’s places emphasis on making sure its farming is done the right way.

“People don’t realize there is nothing subpar about it. It’s real fruit being made into products that they know and love as consumers of Campbell’s,” said Sonke. “At Campbell’s, our purpose is to make real food that matters in life’s moments, that people appreciate and connect to on an emotional level.”

Campbell’s transparent mission is what has made Dixon proud to call it home since 1975. “I think the plant is definitely a staple for the city of Dixon, explained Kiehn. “Dixon isn’t a very big city, but it’s a very close-knit community, and I think the plant reflects that.”



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